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Esther Sui-Chu Ho · Wai-Man Kwong

Parental
Involvement
on Children's
Education
What Works
in Hong Kong



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Parental Involvement on Children's Education

What Works in Hong Kong

 Springer

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Contents

1 Literature Review	1
1 Knowledge Gap in Parental Involvement in Children’s Education.	2
1.1 Multidimensionality of Parental Involvement.	2
1.2 Factors that Affect the Practice of Parental Involvement	3
1.3 Differential Effects of Parental Involvement	3
2 Purpose and Significance of the Study	5
2.1 Studying Parental Involvement in a School Context	5
2.2 Building and Testing a Grounded Theory of Parental Involvement	6
2.3 Examining the Effect of Parental Involvement on Student Learning	6
3 Research Methodology	7
3.1 Research Design.	7
3.2 Research Questions.	9
3.3 Sampling	10
3.4 Triangulation of Research Results	12
References	16
2 Elucidating the Complexity of Parental Involvement in Primary Schools: Three Ethnographic Case Studies	19
1 School A: Alienated Relationship Under a Bureaucratic Leadership.	20
1.1 The Practice and Meaning of Parental Involvement	21
1.2 Beliefs and Actions.	28
1.3 A Critical Analysis: Parental Involvement as Social Interactions that Generate Human Learning	31
2 School B: Instrumental Relationship Under a Utilitarian Leadership.	32
2.1 Practice and Meaning of Parental Involvement.	33

2.2	Beliefs and Actions.	37
2.3	A Critical Analysis: Rhetoric Versus Substance	41
3	School C: Mutual Trust Relationship Under a Communitarian Leadership	42
3.1	The Meaning and Practice of Parental Involvement	43
3.2	Beliefs and Actions.	47
3.3	A Critical Analysis: Visionary Leader, Dedicated Teachers and Well-Trained Parents	51
4	A Synthesis: Convergence and Divergence in the Phenomenon of Parental Involvement Found in Primary Schools in Hong Kong	52
4.1	Convergences.	53
4.2	Divergences.	54
5	Summary.	56
	References	58
3	Building a Grounded Theory on Parental Involvement in Education	59
1	Existing Knowledge About Parental Involvement Practice.	59
1.1	Understanding the Exclusion Practice	59
1.2	In Search of the Inclusion Practice	61
2	Logic of Practice of Parental Involvement.	62
2.1	Habitus	63
2.2	Capital	64
2.3	Field and Space	69
2.4	Parental Involvement for Enhancing Children's Learning	71
2.5	The Conceptual Framework for Understanding Parental Involvement and Student Outcome	74
3	Operationalization of Major Constructs for Survey Studies	74
3.1	The Field of School, Classroom and Home	75
3.2	Habitus of Principals, Teachers and Parents.	75
3.3	Different Types of Capital	76
3.4	Parental Involvement as Social Capital	78
3.5	Student Outcomes.	79
4	Research Questions and Analysis Methods	80
4.1	Factors Related to Parental Involvement	80
4.2	Effects of Parental Involvement on Students' Self-Concept and Achievement	83
5	Summary.	85
	References	86

4 Nature of Parental Involvement: Perspectives from Principals, Teachers and Parents.	91
1 Characteristics of the Fields.	91
2 Practice of Parental Involvement	92
2.1 The Experience of School Principals.	92
2.2 The Experience of Teachers.	96
2.3 The Experience of Parents at Home and in School	101
3 Attitude Towards Parental Involvement: Habitus of Different Stakeholders	103
3.1 Major Barriers and Facilitators for Parental Involvement.	103
3.2 Parental Involvement in School Governance Accepted by Different Stakeholders	105
3.3 Principals' Ideology and Teachers' Attitude Towards Home-School Collaboration.	111
3.4 Principals' and Teachers' Views on Parents.	112
4 Explaining the Practice of Parental Involvement	116
4.1 The Practice of Principals	116
4.2 The Practice of Teachers	119
4.3 The Practice of Parents	122
5 Summary.	127
References	129
5 Effects of Parental Involvement and Investment on Student Learning	131
1 General Characteristics of Student Respondents.	131
2 Parental Investment of Family Resources	133
2.1 Descriptive Analysis of Parental Investment	133
2.2 Dimensionality of Parental Investment	135
3 Parental Involvement at Home and in School	135
3.1 Home-Based Involvement	136
3.2 School-Based Involvement.	136
4 Students' Outcomes	137
4.1 Self-Concept	138
4.2 Academic Achievement.	138
4.3 Variation of Students' Outcomes Among Schools in Hong Kong	139
5 Effects of Family Involvement and Investment on Students' Outcomes	140
5.1 Students' Self-concepts	140
5.2 Students' Academic Achievements	143
6 Summary.	146
References	148

- 6 Conclusions and Implications 149**
- 1 Major Findings that Fill the Knowledge Gap. 149
 - 1.1 Meaning and Nature of Parental Involvement 149
 - 1.2 Factors Related to Parental Involvement: Field,
Habitus and Capital 152
 - 1.3 Effect of Parental Involvement on Students' Learning. 154
- 2 Refined Conceptual Framework 155
- 3 Theoretical Implications 157
- 4 Practical Implications 158
- 5 Limitations of the Present Study and Implications
for Further Study 160
- References 162

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

This book examines parental involvement in children's education in Hong Kong primary schools in order to clarify what works and how it works, with regard to the impacts of parental involvement on children's learning. The primary objectives are:

1. To investigate, in a series of ethnographic case studies, the complexity of parental involvement as a growing phenomenon in primary schools in Hong Kong and how different stakeholders perceive its meaning; and
2. To contextualize the diverse forms that parental involvement may assume in primary schools in times of vast educational reform in Hong Kong, so as to elucidate individual and contextual factors and explain how they may interplay to account for the role of parental involvement in making a positive contribution to children's learning.

Methods

This study combined qualitative and quantitative methodologies in two phases of the research process. In the first phase, we examined parental involvement on a "ground level": from December 2001 to June 2003, fieldwork was conducted in three Hong Kong primary schools. These were chosen to represent "high", "medium", and "low" levels of parental involvement as defined in a previous study, and spanned a variety of socio-economic backgrounds (SES). A total of 68 interviews were conducted with three groups of stakeholders in these schools, covering 3 principals, 18 teachers who were members of parent-teacher associations (PTA), and 18 active parent-helpers and 29 parents. We also conducted participant observation in events organized by the parents' associations of the three schools. It took six months to complete this first phase of the research process, which comprised data collection, coding, and analysis of qualitative data

using a “grounded theory” approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990), and the construction of a conceptual framework for planning a survey instrument.

In Phase Two, we conducted a large-scale survey study that covered the following groups of stakeholders: students, parents, teachers, and school principals. The survey proceeded in two stages. In the first stage, a questionnaire was sent to all the principals of local primary schools. A total of 294 principals returned the questionnaires—a response rate of 32 %. Of these 294 schools, 94 (or around 10 % of the primary school population) were selected as a representative sample of various school types and the socio-economic backgrounds of parents. Questionnaires were then sent to the teachers, parents, and students of these 94 schools in 2004. A total of 2,879 teachers, 15,800 parents, and 13,000 students participated in the surveys. Factor analysis via the Varimax rotation method was used to examine the multidimensionality of parental involvement. Multivariate and multilevel analyses were conducted to explore the factors related to parental involvement and the possible impact of parental involvement on children’s learning outcomes.

Overview of Chapter Themes

The book is organized into six chapters. [Chapter 1](#) states the background of the study, identifies the knowledge gap with regard to parental involvement, clarifies the objectives of the study and its long-term significance, and describes the research methodology.

[Chapter 2](#) presents and synthesizes the results of the ethnographic case studies in the three primary schools. Ethnographic field data revealed parental involvement as a context-dependent, multifaceted phenomenon. The meaning of parental involvement was multilayered, with substantial divergence not only across groups of actors (including school principals, teachers, parents, and children), but within the same group of actors. As beliefs and actions of these groups of actors shaped parental involvement, it was understandable that divergence in its perceived meaning would result in a plurality of practice among primary schools. Among these actors, some were more active and ideologically committed, while others were much less so and could even be indifferent. Parental involvement could take various forms, ranging from home–school communication to involvement in school governance. There was no fixed meaning of what parent involvement is and is for. Its local interpretation and expression varied with actors, particularly the school principals whose personal and professional ideologies largely determined the policy and practice of parent involvement in their schools. The motives of the school principals to incorporate parental involvement as part of the school practice or the school development plan were diverse, being variously driven by organizational contingencies, utilitarian values, and educational philosophy regarding home–school interface in the school education of children.

Although the importance of parental participation in children’s learning was generally recognized by school principals and teachers, views differed greatly on

the merit of investing school resources to mobilize and strengthen parental involvement. Opinions differed as to the relative importance of parental involvement in school development. In one school, the principal considered parental involvement fundamental to school development. In another school, the principal considered parental involvement peripheral to teaching and learning—the “core business” of a school.

Parent volunteering could be regarded as an additional resource for school development, but it could also be taken to mean added workload for teachers. Parental involvement in school governance could be viewed as diluting the professional power of teachers and the administrative power of school principals. It shifts the boundaries of a school as a formal institution, which traditionally kept parents out even though its “core business” was to educate their children. Findings from the three case studies revealed that school principals largely determined the “what” of parental involvement in schools. In all three schools, parents were not involved in decision making in major school policies, particularly those pertaining to classroom instruction and school administration. Tension and conflict existed between teachers and parents in defining parents’ roles and places in a school. Nor was there any general consensus regarding the meaning of parent involvement among teachers in a school. Thus, investigating how different actors defined the “what” and “why” of parental involvement was of importance to our understanding of the complexity of the phenomenon and its local character.

Chapter 3 incorporates existing relevant theoretical and empirical studies on parental involvement in education. This constructs a conceptual framework from which research questions regarding the relationship of parental involvement to various individual and institutional factors were derived. These questions were to be answered in a set of questionnaire surveys for principals, teachers, and parents. Also, in order to assess the extent to which different types of parental involvement affect student learning outcomes, a survey of students along with their academic achievement scores in Chinese, Mathematics, and English were obtained from their schools. The ethnographic case studies enriched the research by furnishing new conceptual categories, extending the range of response options, and identifying domains of investigation and hypotheses to be tested. By reviewing the extant theoretical and research literature on parental involvement in children’s education, as well as the findings of our ethnographic case studies, a conceptual framework was constructed.

The conceptual framework thus derived guided the design of a survey instrument to be administered in the second phase of the study. The survey aimed to profile the state of parental involvement in primary schools in Hong Kong, to benchmark changes in school practice of parental involvement against past studies. In addition, the conceptual framework also guided hypothesis testing in an attempt to account for the diversity of parental involvement at home, in the classroom, and at the school level, as well as to explicate the effects of different forms of parental involvement on children’s learning and school experience.

Chapter 4 presents the survey results obtained from principals, teachers, and parents. Besides answering the research questions, we compare and contrast the

meanings, values, and effects of different stakeholders taken from different forms of parental involvement. We conducted a pilot study to evaluate the questionnaire design and to examine the validity and reliability of the survey instrument before its launch. Planning and preparation for the survey was completed in 2003. It was launched in 2004, with separate survey instruments administered to students, parents, teachers, and school principals. The findings of the main survey indicated that parental involvement took a variety of forms in primary schools in Hong Kong, and its extent had substantially increased over the past few years.

In [Chap. 5](#), we illustrate the perceptions and experiences of students regarding school climate and parental involvement at home as well as in school. With measurements on their self-concepts and achievement scores on Chinese, Mathematics, and English, Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) models are used to assess the extent to which they are affected by individual and school factors, as well as different types of capital generated through parental involvement and parental investment. Results suggest that both parental involvement and investment have significant effects on students' self-concept and academic achievement in primary schools. However, the relative contribution of different forms of parental involvement and investment varied substantially for different outcomes.

Finally, [Chap. 6](#) attempts to put together different pieces of evidence obtained from different methods, techniques, and sources to construct a complete picture of parental involvement practiced in local primary schools. Taking into account knowledge on the convergence and divergence in values, concerns and practices of different stakeholders in parental involvement, as well as the effects of such involvement, we revisit the conceptual framework of the study and provide recommendations for changes in school practice and parent orientation regarding how and in what form parental involvement could more effectively improve children's learning and enhance school accountability in Hong Kong.

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Tables

Table 1.1	Schools participating in the principal survey study
Table 1.2	School characteristics of different types of schools participating in the main survey of students, parents and teachers (N = 94 schools)
Table 1.3	Background of teacher respondents
Table 1.4	Background of parent respondents
Table 1.5	Background of student respondents
Table 2.1	Background characteristics of the three participating schools
Table 2.2	School leadership and home–school relationship emerged
Table 3.1	Objective conditions presented in different fields
Table 3.2	Perceived barriers and facilitators for parental involvement in school by stakeholders
Table 3.3	Components of habitus by stakeholders
Table 3.4	Measures for different types of capital provided by parents
Table 3.5	Measures of social capital by parental involvement
Table 3.6	Measures of students' self-concept and achievement
Table 4.1	Objective conditions presented in different fields
Table 4.2	Form and extent of parental involvement
Table 4.3	Type and percentage of voluntary work engaged in by parents in Hong Kong primary schools
Table 4.4	Actual practice of seven types of parental involvement reported by teachers
Table 4.5	Percentage of variance of seven types of parental involvement between and within schools
Table 4.6	Factor loadings and descriptive statistics of parental involvement requested by teachers
Table 4.7	Number of school governance issues where parents' opinions have been solicited and average frequency of participation in school activities by parents
Table 4.8	Extent of parental involvement for the following four aspects
Table 4.9	Parental participation in school activities reported by parents

Table 4.10	Perceived barriers and facilitators (reasons) for parental involvement in school by stakeholder (in percentage of identification)
Table 4.11	Reasons for parents to participate in school activities
Table 4.12	Zone of acceptance for parental involvement in school governance by stakeholders
Table 4.13a	Factor analysis and reliability of principals' expectation toward parental involvement in school governance
Table 4.13b	Factor loadings and reliability coefficients of teachers' acceptance of parental involvement in SBM
Table 4.13c	Factors loadings and reliability coefficients of parents' acceptance of parental involvement in SBM
Table 4.14	Factors considered for parental involvement in school governance
Table 4.15	Principals' ideology towards home-school collaboration
Table 4.16	Factor analysis and reliability of principals' ideology variables
Table 4.17	View on parents by principals and teachers
Table 4.18a	Factor loadings and reliability coefficients of principals' view on parents
Table 4.18b	Factor loadings and reliability coefficients of teachers' view on parents
Table 4.19	Results of regression models on number of parent volunteers and number of areas where parents' opinions have been solicited
Table 4.20	Hierarchical regression analyses on seven types of parental involvement
Table 4.21	Effect of school, family, student factors and parents' habitus towards home-school collaboration
Table 5.1	Background of student respondents
Table 5.2	Background of students who require special needs or are from Grade 1
Table 5.3	Parental investment of cultural and other resources for students
Table 5.4	Frequency of child-caring activities that parents have participated in
Table 5.5	Extent of agreement with parents participating in school activities
Table 5.6	Three aspects of students' self-concept
Table 5.7	Three domains of student academic achievement
Table 5.8	Variation of six dimensions of students' learning outcomes
Table 5.9	Effect of parental involvement and investment on students' Chinese, Mathematics and English self-concept
Table 5.10	Effect of parental involvement and investment on students' Chinese, Mathematics and English achievements

Figures

- Figure 1.1 Sequential mixed method design
- Figure 3.1 Conceptual framework
- Figure 4.1 School volunteering from 1999 to 2004
- Figure 5.1 Material resources at students' homes
- Figure 5.2 Number of books that student respondents have at their homes
- Figure 5.3 Extent of agreement among students for their parents to join school activities
- Figure 6.1 Refined conceptual framework

Chapter 1

Literature Review

In the Education (Amendment) Ordinance 2004, school-based management (SBM) is aimed “to enhance continuous self-improvement of school and teaching effectiveness through participation of key stakeholders in school decision-making, school self-evaluation and external review.”¹ The most crucial part of SBM is the participation of teachers, parents and alumni in school management. As parents are key stakeholders in education, there has been a growing interest, particularly in the past few years, in promoting their involvement to enhance children’s education and to improve school effectiveness. However, a number of studies suggest that Asian parents are only prepared to support children’s learning *at home*, not *in school*, and that school administrators and teachers are generally not receptive toward parental participation *in school*. It appears that the definition of “parental involvement” varies, and that there are limits to the ways that parents can be involved in school education and the degree of involvement they are willing to undertake. However, we know very little about how schools, teachers and parents understand the meaning and value of “parental involvement”. Nor have we profiled and accounted for the diverse forms of parental involvement in our schools. We speculate that a constellation of individual and school-based factors are at work to determine the success or failure of parental involvement. The present project seeks to investigate these issues by first exploring the complexity of this phenomenon through a series of ethnographic case studies on how principals, teachers and parents perceive and act on parental involvement in the primary schools of Hong Kong. Using a series of survey studies, this project then examines how the different forms and levels of parental involvement are related to individual and institutional factors among all stakeholders in children’s education. Finally,

¹ Briefing session on Education (Amendment) Bill 2002 conducted by Mrs. Fanny Law, Permanent Secretary for Education and Manpower, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government on 31 January 2004.

we assess the extent to which different forms of parental involvement affect student performance based on student survey results and available school records.

1 Knowledge Gap in Parental Involvement in Children's Education

Research studies conducted in the United States, Britain and other European countries show that promoting parental involvement at home or in school has significant benefits such as enhancing student achievement, reducing absenteeism and school dropout rate, and improving homework habits (Epstein 1990, 2011; Ho and Willms 1996; Lareau 1989; Wolfendale 1992). But these studies are far from conclusive. Other studies have demonstrated that parental supervision of children's homework or contact with the school has only a small or even a negative relationship with students' reading and mathematics achievement (Madigan 1994; Muller 1993). However, it is difficult to reach a verdict on the inconsistent research findings because the measures on parental involvement adopted in all these studies varied substantially. A fundamental weakness of many of these studies is that they did not adequately define and/or operationalize the construct of parental involvement.

1.1 Multidimensionality of Parental Involvement

Previous studies have suggested that parental involvement is a multidimensional construct and that different types of parental involvement have varying effects on children's schooling outcomes (Chiu and Ho 2006; Epstein 1990, 2011; Epstein et al. 2002; Ho and Willms 1996; Shen 1995). Epstein's current empirical work with her colleagues at the Centre on School, Family, and Community Partnership in the United States identified six types of parental involvement: parenting, communication, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaboration with the community (Epstein 2011; Epstein et al. 2002). This classification scheme is a comprehensive one and has been adopted as the national standard for parental involvement programs in the United States. Shen et al. (1994), in the first systematic home-school study in Hong Kong, formulated a seven-level theoretical framework. Levels 1 and 2 focused on home-school communication; level 3 focused on parent education; and levels 4 and 5 focused on parental participation in school activities and PTA organizations. The final two levels 6 and 7 were associated with parental participation in school governance. In comparing this framework to that of Epstein's scheme, we note that "collaboration with community" is notably absent. Such schemes or frameworks permit researchers to